



Chem!stry

Name: ()

Class:

Date: / /

Case #2: The Hazardous Chemical

Your best graduate student, a young woman, is engaged in an important project in synthetic chemistry. The target molecule is one that a number of major research groups around the world have tried to make without success. You have come up with a very clever idea that is almost certain to work. Synthesising this molecule will certainly make your reputation and guarantee a promotion. In the course of your background reading you discover that one of the intermediates in the proposed synthetic scheme is closely related to a substance suspected of causing ovarian cancer. You are convinced that this woman is the only member of your group with the experimental skills necessary to carry out this synthesis. If she makes and handles the intermediate, there is some risk to her future health. What should you do?

Taken from Kovac, J. (2004). *The Ethical Chemist: Professionalism and Ethics in Science*.

New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall. ISBN: 0-13-141132-2

Commentary: The Hazardous Chemical

This case raises some issues that will not be obvious to everyone. The obvious issue is the potential risk to the student's health. The first question, of course, is whether the supervisor should disclose the suspected health risk. The next question is, who should decide whether the student should proceed with the project? The obvious answer is that the student should be allowed to choose because her health and career are both at stake. On the other hand, because there is an unequal power relationship between the student and her supervisor, she may not feel that she is free to withdraw if she feels that the risk is too great. This problem may be further complicated by the gender dynamics.

On the other hand, if the supervisor tries to make the decision and takes the student off the project *for her own good*, she can counter by arguing that he is taking away an important career opportunity, a chance at a major research success, which will help her to get a good job.

Another issue is gender discrimination. Would you act the same way if the student were male and the threat was eventual prostate cancer or some other uniquely male disease?